

NewTimes

L O A N G E L E S

the Freak Who Stopped the Subway

MTA basher John Walsh may come across as a lunatic, but his seven-year quest to bring down L.A.'s \$6-billion mass-transit project finally paid off

By
SUSAN
Goldsmith



Jill Stewart goes after Westwood-wrecker Ira Smedra



Peter Rainer loves the fortitude of *Saving Private Ryan*; Andy Klein can name *Pi* to eight places

Bad Teeth on the new Carla Bozulich/Nels Cline project; plus the Darby Crash film fiasco

Morris Newman dons his best Top-Siders to stroll suburban havens for *Art/Design*

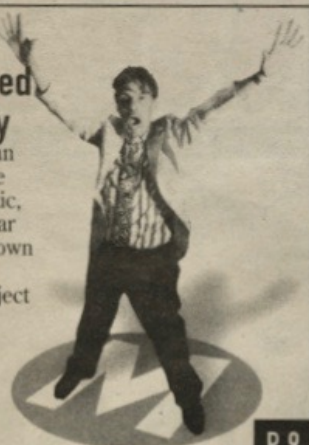
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Volume 3, Number 30
July 23 - 29, 1998

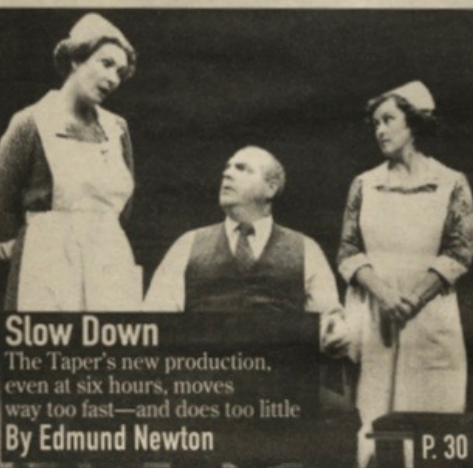
The Freak Who Stopped the Subway

MTA basher John Walsh may come across as a lunatic, but his seven-year quest to bring down L.A.'s \$6-billion mass-transit project finally paid off

By Susan Goldsmith



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Slow Down

The Taper's new production, even at six hours, moves way too fast—and does too little

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OK. One more time. A few more reasons to visit our Website: (a) Peter Gilstrap's online vinyl column, "It Crawled from the Bins." (b) Our entire "L.A. The Forbidden World: The Best of Los Angeles 1998" issue, searchable and handy. (c) Cover story archives. (d) Searchable film and food reviews. (e) The Empress.

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on the cover: photo by Wild Don Lewis

Jesus of the Week

Yes, the fantasies of every young girl should include Jesus, especially young girls in Victorian clothing. God knows (and He's probably

none too happy about it) what's on this thoughtful young filly's mind. But looking at that stern, demanding father figure of a Christ and those well-muscled Biblical studs in the corners, it ain't hard to guess. Plus, it appears her Bible is open to Psalms, and you know what that means.



- Peter Gilstrap

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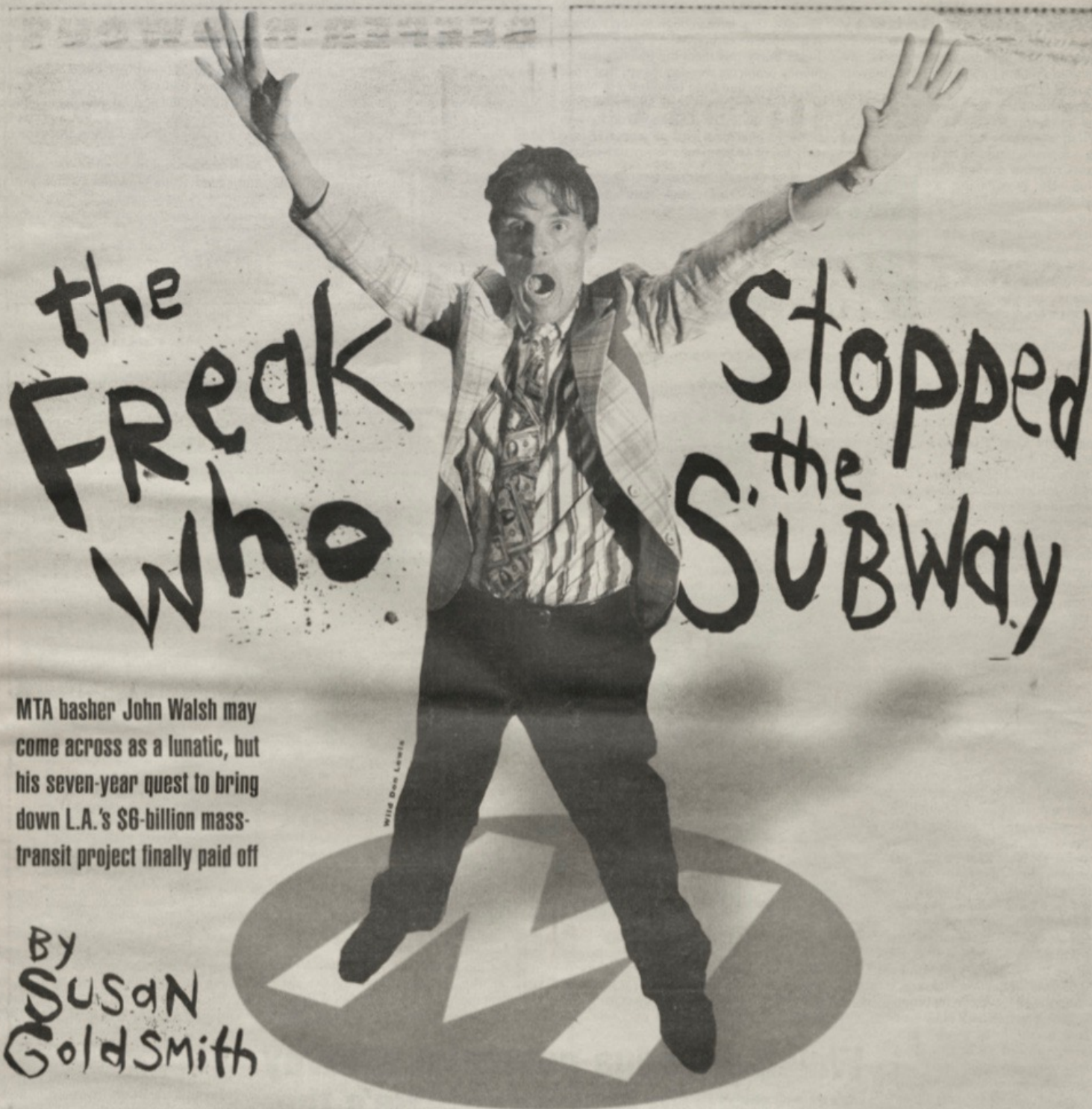
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MTA basher John Walsh may come across as a lunatic, but his seven-year quest to bring down L.A.'s \$6-billion mass-transit project finally paid off

BY
SUSAN
GOLD SMITH

It's meeting time at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and as usual, the board room is filled with hundreds of highly paid lobbyists in snappy suits, bumbling bureaucrats wearing sallow expressions, and transportation "experts" carrying impenetrable charts and graphs.

But thanks to transit agency basher John Walsh, this meeting has its own special theme: urine.

Walsh wants the MTA board, which includes some of Los Angeles' most powerful politicians, to undergo drug testing. The subway project is such a disaster—at least a billion dollars over budget, years behind schedule, and still reeling from the giant 1995 Hollywood Boulevard sinkhole debacle—that Walsh contends (you're never sure how seriously) it can only be because of drugs and alcohol.

When his turn comes to talk during the public-comment session of the meeting, Walsh walks to the front of the boardroom, pulls out 13

cups from a paper bag, and sets them on a wooden railing in front of the lectern. "Urine Specimen" is inscribed on each one, with a board member's name underneath in bold letters.

The packed boardroom becomes as silent as a tomb as Walsh begins to speak.

"I want to know how many of you are willing to be drug tested? You people act so bizarre, and I believe there is a strong likelihood it has to do with drugs and alcohol," he shrieks. "You've spent \$400 million on rail systems that haven't been built!"

Two board members, Larry Zarian and Jim Cragin—political unknowns from small L.A. County cities—timidly raise their hands offering to piss in the cups, but the other board members—including Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan and all five county supervisors—ignore Walsh. They

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The Freak Who Stopped the Subway

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chat with their deputies, shuffle papers, anything to pretend to be busy. The lobbyists try hard not to grin.

A substitute teacher with plenty of time on his hands for harassing MTA officials, Walsh has greasy hair that appears styled by a tornado, and his tattered navy-blue pants ride low around his hips. He is wearing a stained, orange-plaid jacket and a tie emblazoned with pictures of \$50 and \$100 bills (symbolizing what he calls the "MTA money train"). When he speaks, he flails his arms as if he were in the throes of a seizure.

"You couldn't have screwed up a transportation agency this bad if you were sober. And if you are sober, prove it! Here are the cups!" he yells.

He then turns to the audience and shouts, "Hell no, they won't flow!"

Save Zarian and Cragin, the board members continue to look the other way. Above such a fray, they are very powerful people who are in charge of one of America's largest public works projects. In fact, at \$300 million a mile, it has become the most expensive subway system ever.

When Walsh's three minutes are up, an MTA cop removes the urine cups, and it's on to business as usual.

At another regular board meeting several months later, Walsh is supremely annoyed with a decision by Riordan, the board's chairman, to cut public speakers' time to 30 seconds. When the mayor reads Walsh's name from the public speakers' list, and Walsh begins to slowly walk forward, those in attendance notice that he is wearing an S&M ball gag in his mouth that is strapped securely around his head as if he had just been released from some medieval torture chamber. He then spends his half-minute grunting loudly into the microphone.

People all over the room are laughing so hard that they are wiping away tears when Riordan snaps: "Thank you, Mr. Walsh!" But the 54-year-old annoy-supreme, reluctant to stop the show, keeps on grunting as he takes the long trek back to his seat.

Just a couple of weeks ago, Walsh showed up in the MTA board room screaming about pee again. This time, though, he only brings one cup—a 44-ounce Super Big Gulp from 7-Eleven with a ture of MTA board member and L.A. City Councilman Richard Alatorre pasted on it.

Walsh uses his turn at the meeting this time to ask Alatorre if he would fill up the cup. To demonstrate, Walsh brings the Super Big Gulp near his crotch and pretends to urinate into it.

Alatorre looks disgusted and mumbles something to himself.

Just before his 30 seconds are up, Walsh turns to the packed audience and booms: "I better be careful because if he pees into it, and I'm holding it, I could be arrested for possession of drugs!"

Board members look mildly perturbed,

but they quickly move on to other business. Besides, they have enough to worry about. A few months earlier, MTA Chief Executive Julian Burke told them the transit agency's money problems were so severe that once the subway line from downtown to North Hollywood was completed, all new subway construction in Los Angeles would have to be put on hold for at least six years. (To date only 6.5 of 40 planned subway miles have

passed on insider information about bureaucratic shenanigans to key members of Congress and the state legislature.)

"John was very instrumental in stopping this project," says Jon Markman, a former *Los Angeles Times* reporter, now at Microsoft, who broke a raft of stories about the agency's troubles. "It's the facts that stop something like this. By helping reporters get access to the facts and documents and whistleblowers, he stopped this thing."

Markman says Walsh tipped him to several important MTA stories, including an embarrassing 1996 piece about the tunnel-boring machine getting stuck inside a Hollywood mountain. "I was on the phone with him three, four times a week, some-



been built.) If construction continued, Burke warned, the agency would have faced a \$727 million shortfall.



Walsh berates Riordan and Co. at an MTA board meeting.

times daily, and sometimes twice daily," Markman recalls.

Michael Gagan, a lobbyist with Rose & Kindel, a politically connected L.A. firm that has represented several of the MTA's contractors, says Walsh "stopped the subway two to three years before it otherwise would have stopped. Had it not been for John, the agency would have gone bankrupt and gone into trusteeship."

Adds Chip Jacobs, a former *Daily News* reporter who did several investigative stories about the MTA that came from Walsh—including a piece about serious construction

utes before, about a dozen workers were hurried out of a collapsing tunnel near the Barnsdall Park parking lot as dirt and water gushed in.

Even though subway construction in Hollywood had caused streets to sink up to 10 inches and several buildings to buckle a year earlier, most of the merchants had remained thrilled about the project. They figured tourists would someday flock to the neighborhood on the subway and spend scads of money, which would do wonders for struggling businesses and sagging property values. The sinkhole fiasco changed all that.

"My first thought when I saw that sinkhole was that everything I had worked for had disappeared," says Mike Karamanoukian, whose Edgemont Pharmacy is in a shopping center next to where the crater suddenly appeared. "It was a humongous sinkhole. It looked like a meteor had hit the boulevard."

For days, Karamanoukian couldn't get to his business. When he finally reopened the store, Hollywood Boulevard was closed, there were giant wooden walls around the shopping center, and of course, there were no customers.

Karamanoukian, who estimates that he lost \$15,000 to \$20,000 a month for a year after the debacle, is one of 200 property owners, merchants, and residents suing the MTA for a total of \$200 million in damages over the sinkhole disaster.

Everybody asked themselves, *How could this have happened. Could anything have been done to prevent it?* Actually, yes. That is, if anybody had listened to John Walsh. He had been raving about a potential subway tunnel disaster for years—long convinced that the transit agency and its contractors were unprepared to handle such a mammoth public

works project. Two years earlier, in 1990, an underground fire in an unfinished section of a subway tunnel had caused \$2.2 million damage and forced partial closure of the Hollywood freeway for three days. Even in 1990, the subway project was behind schedule and millions of dollars over budget.

"When I first saw him, he looked like he had been on a 10-state killing spree," recalls Ben Bycel, the former executive director of the Los Angeles City Ethics Commission, where Walsh went looking for support for stopping the tunneling in Hollywood in 1992. "He was ferocious, talking about blood on the wall and the MTA. He was this disheveled wacko talking about the subway project not being done right."

In the early '90s, practically every major L.A. politician—including Mayor Tom Bradley, City Councilman Zev Yaroslavsky (now a county supervisor), and Supervisor Kenny Hahn—saw the subway as a tool for turning L.A. into a world-class city. They felt it would make the sprawling metropolis more livable, releasing it from the stranglehold of the automobile. When the 40 miles of subway were completed, air pollution as well as traffic congestion would be reduced, and the world would stop calling L.A. an unlivable urban disaster. A joke. They also saw the subway as a tool for bringing an ethnically divided city together—blacks, Latinos, whites, and Asians, would find a common bond in riding the rails.

The \$6-billion subway project was to be

Walsh on mega-powerful subway contractor Ron Tutor: "He's the Aurick Goldfinger of the MTA."

n't mention another big reason the project came screeching to a halt—John Walsh.

The MTA basher isn't all about outrageous antics, and he recoils at being called a gadfly. Beneath it all, Walsh is a whip-smart government-watcher who, for almost a decade, has used his wild-man persona to expose real MTA problems. With an army of sources inside the huge transit agency, he has tipped the press to stories about mismanagement and abuse of power, and has

defects in downtown tunnels: "John played as big a role as any sinkhole in bringing this project down."

On June 22, 1995, at 3:30 a.m., the ground below Hollywood Boulevard shook, then opened up. No earthquake this time, the shaking left a giant hole—80 feet in diameter—in the middle of the thoroughfare. Min-

funded with federal money and the proceeds of a local sales tax.

"This was about the image of transportation in America," says Senator Tom Hayden (D-Santa Monica), a longtime member of the state Senate Transportation Committee.

But Walsh was convinced the transit agency was corrupt and mismanaged. Three years before the sinkhole disaster, he had gone door-to-door in Hollywood trying to enlist anti-subway support. "We used to call him Chicken Little because he ran around saying the project was designed wrong, and the streets were going to sink," recalls Jerry Schneiderman, a Hollywood property owner and developer. "I thought these were the ravings of a madman."

Undeterred, Walsh plowed ahead alone. He hired his friend Larry Teeter, a criminal

defense attorney who had represented Sirhan Sirhan and Skid Row Slasher Vaughn Greenwood, to file a lawsuit aimed at stopping the Rail Construction Corporation, one of the MTA's predecessor agencies, from undertaking the gigantic tunneling project in Hollywood. The suit, filed in April 1992, in L.A. Superior Court, alleged that adequate environmental studies had not been done on the project and that the lives of children

(at Los Feliz Elementary School across the street from where the bulk of the digging was to be done) were in danger. The complaint focused on four tunnels to be built underneath the parking lot of Barnsdall Park.

After one brief hearing in 1992, L.A. Superior Court Judge Diane Wayne ruled against Walsh's suit, saying adequate environmental studies had been done on the project. Although an appellate court ruled against him, too, Walsh would not shut up, predicting doom to anybody and everybody who would listen.

The disaster, 100 feet from where Walsh had forecast it would happen, made news around the country. And it continued to make headlines in L.A., particularly when reporters found out it would cost more than \$60 million to fix.

"From the day of the sinkhole on, people in Hollywood started listening to John," Schneiderman says.

While Walsh's demeanor telegraphs disorganization and even chaos, the methods he used to bring down the giant public works project were scrupulously plotted out. His plan was formalized on Super Bowl Sunday 1992, when he brought together a dozen transit agency whistle-blowers and critics at a café in Hollywood. There, he told them there was only one way to stop the subway project: *Get between the agency and the money!*

"These board members are like junkies

when it comes to money," Walsh told the group. "It's all about getting the shit into the veins, and the shit is money. That's all they care about!"

His plan was simple. Get connected with MTA insiders and *get the dirt*. "Once we do that," he told his minions, "all we have to do is get the information to the media and then go to Congress."

"It's just a matter of time," he said, "before we bring this agency down!"

Bob D'Amato, a safety consultant and transit agency activist who helped Walsh form what would later become L.A. Twice, a transit agency whistle-blowers' organization, was at that meeting and will never forget it. "We had to develop our credibility, and John had the wherewithal, the strategy, and the political know-how to do it."

Former tunnel miner Pat Choido recalls Walsh's focus and determination. "John was trying to get something organized to fight these transit agency assholes. He gave us direction," says Choido, who also had been a subway safety inspector. "He was the genius in charge of what to do, where to go. John knew the intimate details about the agency that we needed to make the battle plan work."

It was a ragtag army under the leadership of a man who bathed only occasionally and bought his clothes at St. Vincent de Paul clearance sales. There were gruff, uneducated miners; nerdy, soft-spoken tunneling engineers; transit agency bureaucrats with zero political experience; and a few Hollywood activists consumed with conspiracy theories.

Within weeks of that meeting, Walsh started showing up at every transit agency board meeting, where he would hand out his home phone number and address to anyone who would take it. Although he had attended the meetings for years, he let it be known

that he was actively seeking damaging information from agency insiders about the subway project. He told them he knew it was there; he just needed to get his hands on it.

Pretty soon, internal investigations and memos started arriving in the mail. There were late-night meetings with secret informants and covert subway construction tours with sandhogs and engineers. One MTA source, dubbed "Deepshaft," regularly retrieved pieces of confidential documents from the shredder and passed them on to Walsh, who would carefully put them back together for scrutiny.

From his sources, Walsh learned about serious construction defects in the tunnels downtown. Whistle-blowers also gave him documents showing that Metro Rail officials and contractors were over-billing the agency

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Yaroslavsky is known for changing his mind as often as his underwear.

Walsh on board member and Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky: "He's not two-faced, he's four-faced."

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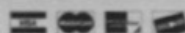
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The Freak Who Stopped the Subway

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by millions of dollars for personal entertainment, extravagant parties, personal fitness trainers, and lavish vacations.

In 1992, Walsh passed on the names and numbers of the whistle-blowers to Congress. As a result, the interest of Representative John Duncan (R-Tenn.), who was on the House Public Works and Transportation Committee, was sparked because one of the whistle-blowers, tunnel safety inspector Ben Pate, hailed from the Volunteer state.

After reviewing the information that Walsh and his friend Bob D'Amato had assembled, Duncan pressured the FBI and General Accounting Office to open inquiries into the transit agency—which made the pages of newspapers across the country, including *The New York Times*. It was the first big public blow to the agency.

"John and D'Amato sent Duncan a package of information that showed criminal wrongdoing," says Bob Inouye, one of the whistle-blowers who was a transit agency auditor. Inouye and several other whistle-blowers eventually sued the transit agency or its contractors and won more than \$2 million in damages. Inouye, who sued the transit agency for firing him after he went to the district attorney with allegations of potential fraud, was awarded \$518,000 by an L.A. jury.

Stunned by the information Walsh has gotten hold of, MTA board members have tried and failed to stop the flow of internal documents, reports, and memos.

"John Walsh gets information many, many times before we do," says board member Zarian, who is also a Glendale city councilman. "The board members are always wondering where he's getting all that information? How does he know what's happening with our funding in Washington and Sacramento? How is he getting those investigations before we do? And how does he know about lawsuits against the agency before we do?"

Over the years, Walsh also developed connections with Federal Transit Administration insiders. He regularly chats with state legislators and their aides and has developed excellent sources at the highest levels of the MTA. "He's known about stuff we didn't know about," says Senator Quentin Kopp (I-San Francisco), chairman of the state Senate Transportation Commission. "He's remarkably on the mark with his information about the MTA....He's roused us from any torpor."

By the mid-'90s, high-powered, six-figure lobbyists were calling Walsh for facts and figures, even though many of them refused to be seen with him in person, particularly at board meetings. "Our fax machine would burn up with internal MTA documents being sent over by John, inspector general reports not yet released publicly....His sources in that agency have been astonishing," says Rose & Kindel's Gagan.

Once Walsh developed his inside sources and the internal information started flowing, he began feeding the press what he had learned. Beginning sometime in 1992, Walsh mailed and hand-delivered documents to reporters and would regularly set up secret meetings between members of the press and his informants. "He'd call me and say, 'Markman I got something really great for you,'" the former *L.A. Times* reporter recalls. "Three quarters

of his stuff wasn't that useful, but 25 percent of it was golden."

Markman says it was Walsh who fed him one of the most important stories of his career, which caused MTA CEO Joseph E. Drew to resign, got the MTA board members summoned to Washington for a verbal hiding by then-Transportation Secretary Federico Peña, and made news across the country.

The story came from an internal document Walsh was leaked late last year show-

ing board member Richard Alatorre.

"The document wasn't public, and John got it to me," Markman recalls.

The story, written by Markman and reporter Richard Simon, was a severe body blow to the ailing agency, which time and again had been accused of steering contracts to the friends of board members. It also kicked off a nasty round of accusations and counter-accusations among several board members. (MTA board member Gloria Molina accused Alatorre of using Drew

Jacobs, who was at the *L.A. Business Journal* and the *Times* before moving to the *Daily News*, says Walsh fed him important MTA stories for years. "I talked to him so much that I think if I was in a car accident today and had brain trauma, I'd remember John's phone number."

While Jacobs (now a freelance writer) was at the *Daily News*, Walsh leaked him an early copy of a 1996 Army Corps of Engineers report, which showed that newly opened downtown Red Line tunnels were plagued with severe construction defects causing water and dangerous gasses to leak through tunnel liners.

The negative MTA stories, which kept appearing in newspapers across the country and resulted in a 60 Minutes segment on the sinkhole fiasco, began to take a toll on the project's federal funding.

In 1994 the L.A. subway project had received \$202 million in federal money, but by 1995 the amount had dropped to \$163 million. By 1996 Metro Rail fell from the top-funded transit project in the country to the third, and Congress provided only a little more than half of the funds—\$83 million—requested by the agency. Last year, the feds appropriated \$61.5 million, but because of the agency's well-publicized problems, Congress froze the money until the MTA could submit a plan demonstrating it could clean up its act financially and otherwise. In December, the feds requested a code of conduct from the 13-member board because of its infighting and inability to manage the agency. Although the recovery plan was finally accepted by the feds earlier this month, the funds still have not been released.

"There is no question that the negative press did affect perceptions in Washington," says former MTA CEO Franklin White, who left the agency in late 1995. "[The MTA's] funding has been hurt by negative press."

About Walsh's role in the transit agency's downfall, White adds, "John certainly has left his mark at the MTA. Clearly he has had a big impact. That cannot be denied."



Walsh's antics may be comic, but they have gotten the attention of the press and even Congress.

ing that Drew had overturned the recommendations of a panel hired to evaluate bids for a major subway contract. It was no small matter as it involved a \$65-million contract for construction management of the Eastside subway line.

to get his friends' contracts while Alatorre suggested she had rigged the bidding panel to influence which firm got the contract.)

After Markman's story ran, Federal Transit Administrator Gordon Linton wrote a letter to board members saying the MTA had lost the

Walsh on MTA board chairman and L.A. Mayor Richard Riordan: "He proves once again that the phrase crooked, Irish politician is not a redundancy."

Based on the confidential document that Walsh provided him, Markman wrote a piece explaining that Drew had ignored the firm selected by a contract-evaluation panel and recommended the company ranked third on the panel's list. Executives from that firm, Metro East Consultants, had worked or raised money for MTA

confidence of Congress because of the infighting and agency mismanagement. Linton said the MTA's troubles were helping other regions seeking federal transit funding because each time an MTA problem was exposed, competing cities used the publicity to convince members of Congress that L.A. didn't deserve the coveted transportation funds.

Despite his press and political connections, Walsh has remained virtually unknown. Rarely is he quoted in newspaper stories about the MTA, and when he is, he is referred to in the vein of a recent *L.A. Times* article: "the perennial MTA gadfly."

The description makes him sound harmless enough. But Walsh has offended and insulted so many people in his 17 years of MTA activism that many MTA observers are amazed he's still alive. "In fact, he has made so many enemies that if he were ever murdered, the cops would have to assign a full squad room of detectives to the case because there would be so many suspects," says Jacobs.

Walsh once came to an MTA meeting with a picture of the aforementioned Alatorre taped to his face and a straw up his nose (another skit aimed at demonstrating that the councilman and board member has a cocaine problem). He also regularly accuses Riordan, who was arrested three times—in 1964, 1971, and in 1975 for driving under the influence of alcohol—of being drunk at meetings. (The mayor contends that he long ago kicked his alcohol problem.)

After the downtown tunnel walls were found to be leaking potentially explosive

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"If I knew I was gonna end up here, I would've peed on the couch months ago."



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methane gas into the subway system in 1994, Walsh showed up at an MTA board meeting wearing an Army-issue gas mask.

When former county supervisor and MTA chairman Ed Edelman (under whose watch some very big MTA fiascoes occurred, such as the sinking of Hollywood's streets up to 10 inches a year prior to the sinkhole disaster) decided to retire in 1994, Walsh showed up with a gift. It was Edelman's final MTA meeting, where he was being honored by his fellow board members for "outstanding service." It was an orgy of congratulations and admiration before a packed audience, with lots of handshaking, long-winded speeches, and official photo-ops. Walsh wanted to congratulate Edelman, too, so—in front of the entire assemblage of suits—he handed the honoree a bronze statue of a Buddha rubbing its belly and patting its head. The trophy was inscribed: "Good Riddance Ed Edelman—World's Worst Chairman."

Walsh is non-partisan, an equal opportunity hater.

About overweight MTA board member and Democratic County Supervisor Gloria Molina—whom critics have accused of humiliating bureaucrats in public to cover her own political ass—Walsh says: "Every time she lies, she gains two pounds."

About Riordan, a Republican, Walsh says: "He proves once again that the phrase crooked, Irish politician is not a redundancy."

He describes board member and Democratic County Supervisor Yaroslavsky, who critics say changes his opinion as often as his underwear, like this: "He's not two-faced, he's four-faced."

About County Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, the only African-American on the MTA board, who was once briefly courted by the Clinton Administration and is a former partner in one of the country's largest law firms, Walsh proclaims: "She's Malcolm X's worst nightmare."

As for Alatorre: "He looks like a character from *The Wild Bunch*, and he's even more crooked."

His summary of MTA board member and County Supervisor Don Knabe, who succeeded the dull-witted Deane Dana on both boards: "He's Deane Dana minus the brain."

Asked about board member and County Supervisor Mike Antonovich, a political conservative who has been critical of the subway project for years, Walsh says: "If he says one more thing in favor of bus riders, he's going to give right-wing fanatics a bad name."

Indeed, part of Walsh's brilliance is that you never know what he will say—or do.

"John is one of the great performance artists in L.A.," says Eric Mann, a labor organizer and leader of the Bus Riders Union, which has successfully sued the transit agency to keep bus fares down. "His brilliance is in breaking out of how you are supposed to testify at public meetings."

When Molina and Alatorre (who may share a Latino heritage but are arch-enemies) were fighting at public MTA meetings last year over the \$65-million Eastside subway contract, Walsh lashed out at both of them. Molina called Alatorre "a very corrupt politician who has his bloody fingerprints all over this thing" for allegedly trying to steer the contract to his friends. Alatorre countered that



Molina says Walsh is an out-of-control wacko.

Molina was trying to do the same thing by getting her buddies on the panel that evaluated the bids.

The losing bidder, Metro East Consultants, filed suit against Molina and her staff, alleging they waged a battle against the firm as part of her political vendetta against Alatorre. A judge ruled that "improper external pressure" had been exerted but was not more specific.

The judge ordered that the process begin anew, but since rail construction has been suspended, the issue may now be moot.

During one contentious episode between the two enemies, Walsh addressed the board as a fight announcer:

"In this corner," he boomed, "fighting for East L.A. is Kid Alatorre! And in the other corner, fighting out of Mount Washington is Mountain Molina at 380 pounds! Let's rumble!"

He then shrieked, "I'm trying to get HBO to broadcast the [MTA] meetings. I pitch it this way: You made a fortune

with Mexican fighters, and you'll make a fortune with these two."

Last year, when the transit agency was searching for a new chief executive officer, a couple of MTA staff members wrote up a fake press release outlining why Walsh would be perfect for the job: "No bus or rail experience. Extensive color-coordinated wardrobe. Best pals with Mayor Riordan." Walsh got hold of the release and faxed it to reporters and editors across the country.

Not all of Walsh's *schtick* is funny. When subway mechanic Brian Bailey was killed in November after getting hit in the head with a 3,600-pound hoisting bar, Walsh showed up at an MTA meeting in a froth. He had pictures of Bailey's brains, which had splattered onto the sidewalk outside the Universal City subway site as his body was

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Walsh on transit board member and L.A. County Supervisor Gloria Molina: "Every time she lies, she gains two pounds."

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The Freak Who Stopped the Subway

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being taken out of a shaft. While addressing the board, he waved the photos and embarked on a classic rant that sent one board member, Jenny Oropeza, running out of the room crying.

"First you killed him," Walsh yelled, "then you botched transporting him to the ambulance, and a part of his brain was left on the street. Then you tried to hose the brains off into the sewer, and in typical MTA fashion,

were found to have substandard, thin walls, and the costly 1990 tunnel fire near Union Station occurred in the midst of one of his company's first subway projects. Then there were the two Tutor-Saliba/Perini worker deaths. After Pasillas was decapitated in one of Tutor's tunnels, Cal/OSHA, the state agency that monitors workplace safety, cited the company for 14 mostly serious safety violations and imposed fines of \$70,500. A Tutor-Saliba/Perini foreman was later criminally charged in the case for violating several safety laws.



Asked about the man and his mouth, the mayor responds. "John Walsh? What, are you trying to ruin my day?"

you couldn't even sluice his brains into the sewer right!"

Several audience members were disgusted, more by Walsh's insensitivity than the MTA's.

"He was talking about the brains of Brian Bailey and how they hosed his brains into the gutter," says Dana Gabbard, president of the Southern California Transit Advocates, a group that supports mass transit. "It was in graphic, gory detail. John was bludgeoning the board about it, and it was distasteful."

But in Walsh's defense, Bailey had been the third subway construction worker to die in 1997 (sandhogs Eleazar Montes and Jaime Pasillas also were killed in separate accidents), and Walsh felt it was high time somebody made a scene about the agency's horrible safety record in the tunnels. All three workers were killed, in part, because safety regulations had been ignored, and Walsh went on to warn that others would follow if contractors were allowed to be scoundrels. It wasn't his first rant about the project's poor worker-safety record.

In a speech that he gave to the board more than once before the workers were killed, he shrieked: "You people don't give a rat's ass about subway worker safety! Someone is going to be killed in those tunnels, and when they are, I'm going to dip my hands in the dead worker's blood and spatter it in your faces!"

In a reference to the large number of Latinos employed as subway workers, Walsh yelled: "You don't care how many Mexicans you have to kill to get this thing done!"

Tunnel contractor Ron Tutor has been the target of many John Walsh attacks because of his company's defective subway work and because its alleged safety violations resulted in two of the three deaths. "He's the Aurick Goldfinger of the MTA," Walsh once announced to those assembled at a board meeting.

The tunnels Tutor's firm built downtown

When contacted for this piece, Tutor said: "Are you describing Walsh as the lunatic he is? He's a disgrace, and it's a shame the media even acknowledges him."

Other people, Senator Hayden for one, appreciate Walsh's style and respect his connections within the transit agency, though they believe he has had little effect on the MTA's corrupt ways.

"With an establishment that won't listen, it doesn't matter how many facts you marshal or how you dress," Hayden says. "[Walsh] is like a theatrical character whom Shakespeare would have used if he had written tragedy-comedy about Los Angeles."

When asked about Walsh, Molina sneers: "He comes off as a kind of wacko who is not in control and is frightening." Ignoring the fact that many believe he brought problems to light that stopped the huge project, she adds: "For whatever reason, he just isn't effective. Capability just isn't there."

Riordan says about the man and his mouth: "John Walsh? What, are you trying to ruin my day?"

MTA board members Yaroslavsky and Alatorre refused to be interviewed for this article, while several other board members politely referred to Walsh as "a character," "entertaining," or "very bright." "Look," says Zarian, "Einstein didn't look very pretty either."

But despite what they say for the public record, practically every MTA board member curses Walsh in private, insiders say. Gagan, the Rose & Kindel lobbyist, says Walsh "has personally attacked everybody on that board....I think they really hate him for that."

Like many a fast-talking, quick-witted pain in the ass, John Walsh is a product of New York City. His father was a tough-as-nails cab driver with a jaundiced view of the world. "My father taught me how to spot

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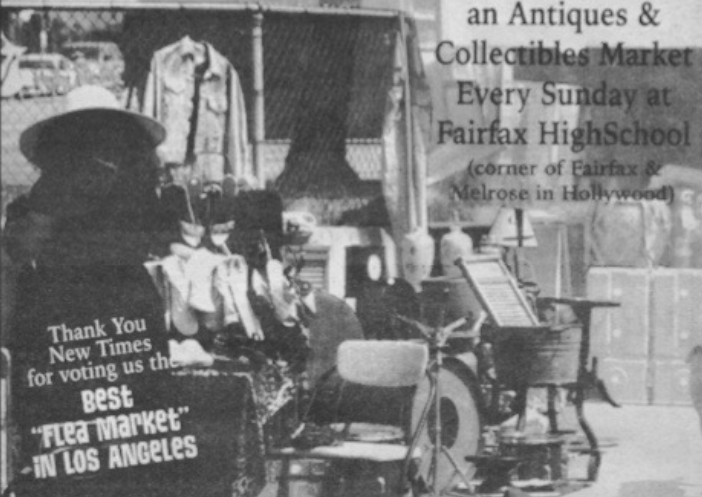
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
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The Freak Who Stopped the Subway

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bullshit," Walsh recalls. "That's the best gift a parent can give." His mother was also a take-no-shit New Yorker who worked in a department store office. Although the couple generally were not politically active, they led the first New York City rent strike in 1953 after their landlord refused to provide steam heat, which was required under the terms of their lease. They filed a grievance, and a judge ordered that the rent be paid to the court until the heat was turned on. Other tenants followed suit, and the hot steam was soon restored.

The oldest of three children, John attended private Catholic schools all his life. In pictures from his high school days, he is neat and well-groomed. Walsh has no real explanation for why he has turned into a haberdasher's worst nightmare. But those who know him, such as Orange County Register statehouse reporter Mark Katches, believe Walsh has more important concerns than his looks. "He's a genius type lacking the social polish of someone with a 100 IQ," Katches observes.

Walsh's sister, Jean Lautner, now a homemaker in upstate New York, remembers her big brother as a smart, serious, and private boy. "He used to wear jackets and ties and dressed very conservatively," she recalls. "He was someone who would champion the underdog. He believed in justice."

After finishing high school, Walsh attended Fordham University, where he majored in English. To avoid the Vietnam draft after graduation, he joined the Peace Corps and was sent to Ethiopia. Walsh recalls that he wasn't sure of his career path when he got out of college, but even then had an overriding goal: "I wanted to be the center of attention."

Back in the states, he spent a few years living in Berkeley where he worked at a free medical clinic. Of his time in Northern California, he says (without even the hint of a smile): "In Berkeley, I learned how to present myself."

Shortly after arriving in Los Angeles in 1976, he wrote three episodes of *The Love Boat*, which he sold for \$50,000. He still receives royalties when his episodes are rebroadcast. His favorite stars Pearl Bailey as the mother of a crew member vacationing on the ship with a new boyfriend, whose amorous antics continuously embarrass her son in front of his shipmates.

But Walsh insists his real vocation is education. He opted for the freedom of substitute teaching so he could work with kids of all ages in the L.A. Unified School District. He works as many days of the school year as he wants and makes about \$130 a day.

Walsh became interested in transit issues because, like many a native New Yorker, he doesn't drive. He attended his first transit agency meeting in the mid-1980s because there was talk that a rail system was in the works. "I thought this train system was going to swallow the bus system," Walsh says. "I feared being isolated without transportation."

At an early meeting he attended of the Rapid Transit District (one of two agencies that eventually merged to create the MTA), Walsh remembers two old ladies addressing the board about a bus line that was about to be eliminated. As they spoke, pushing back tears, Walsh watched an RTD board member doing her nails. "That's when I thought, 'Fuck you! You want to do your nails while you take our fucking bus service away. I'm gonna take your fucking money away!'"

Although a whole new John Walsh was born that day, it took years for him to learn about transit politics, and nearly a decade

for him to figure out how to penetrate such a large, powerful political machine. Along the way, he met legendary L.A. hippie Gypsy Boots, the kooky vegetarian who was a regular on the *Steve Allen Show* in the '60s. Boots gave him this advice: "Listen, John, if you want people to take you seriously in L.A., act nutty."

When asked if the weird clothes are indeed part of an act, Walsh says: "I'm not cultivating my nuttiness, I'm allowing it to come out. Remember, I'm the boy next door. The key is, I live next door to the Griffith Park Planetarium."

Walsh's two-bedroom Hollywood apartment is the perfect reflection of the man. It is filthy and filled with overflowing piles of MTA documents, reports, and newspaper clippings. Walsh lived with a girlfriend in Berkeley in the '70s, but it's clear from the looks of the place why he's been a bachelor ever since.

Except for once-a-month MTA board meetings that usually last about four hours in the morning, Walsh spends his days like this: After substitute teaching, he goes to MTA headquarters to pry information from his sources, comes home, heats up some soup, and starts sending out press releases and calling reporters about "the great transportation Satan."

"The study of the MTA would turn a Marxist into a libertarian," Walsh says from one of his favorite haunts, a Denny's around the corner from his apartment. "The problem isn't bureaucracy. It's crooked politicians. Crooked politicians build crooked tunnels.... There are no good guys on that board."

Walsh is repeatedly called names—like "fucked-up wacko," "filthy publicity hound," and "unpredictable kook"—but the one that drives him even crazier than he appears to be during his most outrageous public tirade is "gadfly."

"A gadfly is a senior citizen who is either retired or on welfare who spends their time getting up at public meetings giving the same old speech over and over again. They're jerking off."

Moving into overdrive, arms waving, Walsh leans across the table and shouts: "I'm not a gadfly! I'm cancer. Cancer on the body politic!"

Now that subway construction is dead for at least the next six years, Walsh believes the board will start looking for new ways to get money from Washington.

"The subway will be replanned as light rail," he predicts. "This agency is a perpetual planning machine. (He gives his board-members-are-junkies-about-money speech again.) They don't give a rat's ass about transportation."

Walsh vows that whatever the future brings, he will *never* stop going after the MTA officials who have run the giant public works agency into the ground and squandered billions of dollars.

"No matter how much of a defeat the MTA suffers, when the MTA war criminals escape, I'll become like [Nazi hunter] Simon Wiesenthal," he vows, wide-eyed.

After the interview, Walsh sets out for home on foot. Reams of documents are shoved under an armpit of his orange, plaid sport coat. Wary pedestrians move away as he crosses the street. He seems the kind of fellow who might be capable of any manner of madness at any moment. None of them realize that they are walking past a man whom many regard as a hero—a more effective public servant than any mayor in the city's history.

"He's sort of Biblical," says Ben Bycel, the former director of the City Ethics Commission. "The guy has done a hell of a service for this city.... He's the prophet of Los Angeles." □